

Superintendent Candidate's Forum Provides Engaging Start to Convention

PTA delegates attending the first general session of the 2008 WSPTA Convention on May 2nd, were treated to an informative and engaging forum of the candidate's running for State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

The panel of candidates included: Dr. Terry Bergeson, who has served as state superintendent of public instruction since 1997; Don Hansler, a researcher and presenter on methods of teaching thinking skills as well as a volunteer teacher of a specialized science program in the Eatonville and Orting school districts; and Dr. Richard Semler, the superintendent of Richland School district who has also served as assistant superintendent and superintendent in a number of school districts throughout Washington State. A fourth candidate, Randy Dorn announced his candidacy on May 1st, too late to be included in the forum. Dorn is Executive Director of the Public School Employees of Washington and served seven years in the House of Representatives where he was Chair of the Education Committee.

Moderating this event was Scott Allen, Washington State PTA Vice President, who suggested delegates consider some facts about the Washington's public schools at the beginning of the forum. "More than half of public school students in Washington are enrolled in the four counties (King, Kitsap, Pierce and Snohomish) making up the Puget Sound metropolitan area," Allen said. In addition, "more than 75 percent of students are enrolled in western Washington districts, but 45 percent of the school districts are in eastern Washington," he added.

In her opening comments, Dr. Terry Bergeson detailed some of the positive outcomes from our state's education reform process, such as kids are more prepared for life in the 21st century now than they were before our state started this process; Washington ranks as one of the top in SAT scores in the nation for states that have more than half kids who take this college-bound test; the number of children who have access to advanced placement courses has quadrupled; academic programs for children in struggling schools have seen tremendous success; and this winter a new career and technical piece of legislation passed which will open up opportunities for kids who are hands-on learners and desire a future in skilled trades.

However, she also discussed that because of the No Child Left Behind legislation which passed several years ago, "there is a punitive accountability system that is crushing the moral of our teachers overburdening the testing program because of requirements at the federal level," she said. Bergeson expressed the need to keep the accountability, but to support the teachers more. She also alluded to the money crises in education. "We have a broken funding system," she stated. Bergeson also shared with delegates that she is currently putting a proposal to address this problem.

Don Hansler's opening comments focused on five major projects that he would pursue if elected, including bonuses for teachers, full and equal funding, a two level diploma system, significant revisions of WASL, and introduction of teaching/thinking skills into the curriculum. He urged voters to read his campaign statement and essays that detail his plans by emailing him at donhansler1@aol.com,

Dr. Richard Semler shared his own struggles of being an at-risk student who hated school and life, and how three teachers at his high school reached out to him and changed his life forever. He asked delegates, "Are we doing everything we can do in our state to help every child at risk to be successful?" Semler stated that we are not doing everything we need to do and that is why he is running for this office.

Some statistics he shared to illustrate this problem is that there are 14,000 students each year in this state who drop out from 8th to 10th grade. In addition, he explained that the superintendents of the various school districts across the state are fighting for funds. Semler feels that the WASL is too large, too expensive, and adds little value to struggling students and teachers in a time where there are major funding shortages that are causing school districts to cut

teacher salaries and staff. "Our state leadership is fractured with no strategic plan to lead us out of this complex problem," he said as he finished his opening comments.

Questions for this forum were compiled from responses of PTA members in a Zoomerang survey. The first question asked candidates about their thoughts on whether or not high school graduation requirements should be aligned with state college entrance requirements.

Dr. Bergeson responded in favor of the package of graduation requirements the state has now—a student plan (and support for that plan through Navigation 101), coursework, an external assessment system, and a project for students to apply themselves. She explained that this level of rigor is necessary to make a diploma meaningful and relevant for life in the 21st century.

Dr. Semler also suggested that the high school graduation requirement should not be the same as the college enrollment requirements. "We need to have diploma that allows students to go the direction they want to go," he explained.

Hansler was in favor of a two level diploma system in high school.

The second question asked candidates to describe the positive and negative attributes of the WASL assessment system, and how they see WASL or an alternative state testing system evolving over the next 10 years.

Dr Semler explained that the state needed to improve student learning and the WASL did this, but didn't give teachers diagnostic tools. He explained that this was the case even before No Child Left Behind. He stated that he would like to see the system evolve to more emphasis on diagnostics, and suggested the creation of a new test with less open ended questions that are so expensive to grade. He also mentioned that some states, such as Nebraska, have figured out a way around No Child Left Behind and our state needs to look into this as well.

Hansler affirmed that the WASL was developed in the right way, but stressed that he would like to change the WASL significantly.

Dr. Bergeson related how the state started with standards in the core academic areas and built an assessment system around those standards. "The result is that more kids are graduating with the skills they need for the 21st century," she said. Unfortunately Bergeson said that because of an added test burden by No Child Left Behind, there is currently too much testing. In addition, the stakes of making adequate yearly process puts too much pressure on everyone. Bergeson is in favor of shorter WASL tests, more diagnostic tools for teachers, and plans to fight for changes in No Child Left Behind, especially as it relates to ESL students, and children with disabilities.

The next questions asked candidates about the education budget—how they would advocate for more money, what improvements they would make if money wasn't an issue, and what would be their first step in making improvements in the education system with the current funding situation. While all candidates acknowledged that the state's education budget is underfunded, they had different ideas regarding solutions to this issue. Hansler suggested a change to the tax structure.

Dr. Bergeson pointed towards the over-reliance on local levies as a major problem. She expressed the need for state funding of education as well as the need to equalize the funding system. Bergeson outlined three needs that need to be addressed: 1) a compensation system for teachers, providing them with more money for professional certifications; 2) additional money for transportation and instructional resources at the district level; and 3) financial resources to provide time and support for struggling students.

Dr. Semler described the need to move beyond advocacy towards creating a detailed strategic plan for the next 20 years that would raise teacher salaries, lower class sizes, and incrementally work with legislators together to reach specific targets each year. He added that there is a need to attract more teachers, especially math teachers, and only by raising teacher salaries will qualified individuals move out of the business community and into the classroom to fill this need.

The final question asked candidates how parents can be included in decision making regarding educational issues. Dr. Semler explained that he would organize institutional ways to bring people on board to discuss things to develop better solutions. "Rather than helping parents buy into what I want to do, I would work together with them to figure out our strategy," he said.

Hansler offered parents access to an open line at his office and to personally read all hand-written mail.

Dr. Bergeson suggested more forums with parent groups, such as the PTA, to get parent voice on funding issues, changing the WASL, discussing No Child Left Behind, any other topics relating to educational process and funding.